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Adler, Nettie

Wage earning children in England

[London]

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WAGE EARNING CHILDREN IN ENGLAND.*

By Miss Nettie Adler,

Hon. Sec. of the Committee on Wage Earning Children.

The mass of information contained in the Minutes of Evidence taken before the Inter-Departmental Committee on the Employment of School Children presents us with a vivid and, we may assume, an accurate picture of the condition of these young wage-earners in England and Wales. We are enabled to compare the conditions of employment, the wages earned and the hours worked in different industrial and agricultural centres, and to form, in some measure, a fairly complete idea of the problems to be solved.

The appointment by Mr. Ritchie of this Committee of Inquiry was the direct outcome of the action taken about six years ago by the Women's Industrial Council, at the instigation of the late Mrs. F. G. Hogg, whose name will always be remembered as one of the pioneers of the movement. Owing to representations made by a deputation to Sir John Gorst, organised by the Council, a return was obtained by Parliament from Elementary Schools in England and Wales, showing the extent of the labour of children, their ages, occupations, number of hours worked, and the pay received. The return was avowedly incomplete, but it contained such evidence of the existence of over-work and over-pressure, that Sir John Gorst spoke of the paper as "a painful and sickening document," and as "throwing a lurid light upon the social conditions of large classes of the population."

The need for further investigation having been clearly demonstrated, the Inter-Departmental Committee began their deliberations in January, 1901, and was composed of Commissioners, representing the Home Office, the Board of Education, and the Board of Trade. Among the witnesses examined were members of the London and the great provincial School Boards, the Public Control Officer of the London County Council, representatives of Trade Associations interested in the employment of child labour, School Teachers, Managers, and School Attendance Officers. The results of certain independent investigations undertaken since the issue of the Parliamentary Return were

* A paper read at the Conference of the National Union of Women Workers, on October 29th, 1902.

also submitted to the Commissioners, notably by the London School Board, the London County Council, the Liverpool School Board, and the Committee on Wage Earning Children. The information submitted by the London County Council dealt almost exclusively with children employed in shops; whilst that presented by the Committee on Wage Earning Children, set forth the home conditions of 7,000 boys and girls engaged in different occupations in various districts of London and in the provinces.[1] The statistics furnished by these organisations were regarded by the Commissioners, not only as confirming the results obtained by the Government Return, but as showing that the figures then given were well under the number of children actually employed. Whereas only 4 per cent. of the children in attendance in the year 1898 were returned as wage earners, the figures presented by Mr. Hance, the Clerk of the Liverpool School Board, demonstrate that nearly 7½ per cent. of children attending Liverpool schools were employed in the spring of 1901. Again, the Committee on Wage Earning Children secured the investigation of 3,897 cases in 107 London schools having an average attendance of 42,097. This is a proportion of about 9 per cent., or if we estimate the number on the roll as 49,000, which would probably be near the mark, the proportion will be 8 per cent. of wage earners for London, as against 6 per cent. in the Parliamentary Return. It will be seen, therefore, that the question is still an acute one, and that legislation is urgently needed to cope with the evil.

The employment carried on by children of school age may be roughly classified under four heads:—

1. Children employed in and for shops.
2. ,, ,, as street hawkers.
3. ,, ,, in domestic work and home industries.
4. ,, ,, in agriculture.

In London the number of boys employed by shopkeepers appears to exceed the total of those working in any other industry. The Parliamentary Return gives the sum of 15,132 children[2] engaged in this calling, whereas hawking was shown to occupy only 2,745 boys, and domestic work 3,205. The investigations undertaken by the Committee on Wage Earning Children, although, of course, on a smaller scale, showed proportionately the same results, 1,704 being engaged in work connected with shops, 366 as street hawkers, and

[1] "Minutes of Evidence taken before the Inter-Departmental Committee on the Employment of School Children" (cd. 895, 1902). App. 26, 27, 28, p. 373, *seq.*

[2] "Parliamentary Return, Part I., Children Working for Wages, 1899."

633 in domestic employment. The most important evidence as to children working for shops was that presented to the Commissioners by Mr. Spencer, the chief officer of the Public Control Department of the London County Council.[1] The Council is the local authority for London, and their inspectors have special facilities for obtaining information under the Shop Hours Act. Of 1,448 typical cases submitted by Mr. Spencer, 492 were found to be working under twenty hours weekly, while 413 were employed from twenty to thirty hours, 446 from thirty to thirty-nine hours, eighty-seven from forty to forty-nine hours, and ten for fifty hours and upwards. 8,465 children were returned by Mr. Spencer as being employed by shopkeepers. One-fourth were found to be engaged in delivering newspapers, an employment which always entails early morning labour, in many instances for two hours before school. 529 boys were described as working for dairies. Early morning work is, of course, the rule in this occupation; the lads thus employed often arrive at school heavy and tired out, and quite unfit to derive any real advantage from the instruction imparted to them. When engaged in investigations for the Committee on Wage Earning Children, I found five boys in one school, all of whom were out every morning at half-past four. But the most undesirable of all forms of work is that of lather-boy in a barber's shop. The hours of employment are longer than in any other trade. I do not think that I have ever met a barber's boy who was at work for less than forty hours weekly. They are engaged usually from 5 to 10 every evening, all day Saturday up till midnight, and from 8 or 9 on Sunday morning until 1 or 2 in the afternoon. The long confinement in a close and vitiated atmosphere is, of course, injurious physically, but, unfortunately, there is too much reason to fear that in some districts barbers' shops are centres for betting and gambling transactions. Many of the witnesses who gave evidence before the Committee were of opinion that this is one of the forms of employment which should be entirely prohibited.[2]

Street-hawking in the Metropolis, as is apparently the case in other great centres of population in the Kingdom, is nearly always carried on by children from the poorest homes. We may probably regard as typical the home circumstances of one hundred and thirty-four street traders investigated by the Manchester police in March, 1901.[3] In fifty-four instances either the father or mother, and in some cases both parents, were addicted to drink, and in a

[1] "Minutes of Evidence," p. 84, *seq.*

[2] "Minutes of Evidence," pp. 47, 49, 51, 87, 98, 99, 157, 159.

[3] "Minutes of Evidence," p. 450.

large number of other cases it was shown that there had been other difficulties in the home, such as separation or desertion. In only twenty-seven families were the parents returned as being "steady." In London, as in other large towns, the larger proportion of street traders are newspaper sellers, but a few deal in matches, flowers, studs, and toys. It is very doubtful whether the Parliamentary Return touched even approximately the number of street sellers in this great centre of population. To obtain accurate information, a census of street sellers taken in the street would be needed. An investigation made in the schools would probably be incomplete, for there is considerable reticence displayed by this class of children regarding their lives outside the school. At the Conference summoned by the City of London Guardians on October 15th, 1902, the view was expressed that, in the Metropolis, special legislation was needed for dealing with juvenile street traders. The evidence submitted to the Commissioners by the Chief Constable of Birmingham is a strong indictment of the evils of street hawking. Of 713 boys and girls who were found selling in the streets in March, 1901, *four hundred and fifty-eight, or nearly two-thirds of the whole number*, had been prosecuted for various offences within the previous six months. *One hundred and fifteen of these young people were charged with felony, and one hundred and eighty-five with gambling.*[1]

It is a relief to turn to the children who are employed in domestic work, for on the whole they are exposed to fewer temptations and to less over-pressure than other wage earners. Boys engaged in this occupation are usually employed in private houses before school, and in most instances receive a good early morning meal. A great objection, however, to this kind of labour is that it usually brings with it unpunctual and irregular attendance at school, even in instances where it might be least expected. In one very bad case we found that the boy was employed at the house of a well-known educational expert. There is, however, a good deal of drudgery performed by girls in their own homes. The hard cases are those in which girls or boys, but especially girls, are engaged in some home industry also, such as sewing on buttons, finishing trousers, or match-box making, for twenty, thirty, and even sixty hours weekly. Wood chopping in some of the poorest districts in the North and West of London occupies a good many girls for very long hours, in some instances for as many as forty or fifty per week.[2] Particularly severe is the lot of the children of small laundresses who are often employed

[1] "Minutes of Evidence," p. 471. [2] "Minutes of Evidence," p. 34.

both in housework and in ironing, in a steam-laden atmosphere, for two or three nights weekly till 10 o'clock, and all day Saturday.

Although only 6,115 children are described in the Parliamentary Return as being engaged in agricultural work, a careful study of the evidence given before the Commissioners would seem to show that the figures should be greatly augmented, especially if hop-pickers and fruit-pickers are taken into consideration. The lack of adult labour in many districts has tended towards an increase in the employment of school children, and in Devonshire[1] it has given rise to the practice of boarding-out children on farms where they receive food and lodging in payment for work done before and after school hours. This is a matter which I think should receive investigation in the future. It is an arrangement which has been strongly condemned as most undesirable by school authorities in Germany. For further information on the subject I would refer you to Herr Agahd's book on "Children's Labour in Germany," "Kinderarbeit und Gesetz gegen die Ausnutzung kindlicher Arbeitskraft in Deutschland." Herr Agahd has devoted his life to the problem.

Before passing on to the remedies proposed for dealing with the evils which I have described, it may be well to consider for a moment, whether the poverty plea can be brought forward as an argument against legislation, and whether the average wage of a child—about two shillings—is really needed for the support of the family. In the evidence to the Commissioners submitted by the Committee on Wage Earning Children, particulars of the income of 802 London families were shown.[2] In only 143 instances were the earnings found to be under twenty shillings weekly. In 189 cases it ranged between twenty and twenty-five shillings, in 154 cases between twenty-five and thirty shillings, and 316 families were returned as being in receipt of thirty shillings or over. The same results were obtained from the provinces, returns being obtained from Bradford, Leeds, Gateshead-on-Tyne, Coventry, and Plymouth. Of 714 cases investigated more than half had a family income of thirty shillings or over, while in 258 instances it was shown to be over thirty-five shillings. Further study of our schedules revealed the fact that the receipt of good wages by the parents did not prevent the children from working excessively long hours. A boy was found to be employed for forty-seven hours weekly whose father was a foreman in receipt of £2, another whose parents earned forty-five shillings was employed as a coal boy, for the same period weekly. The son of a police sergeant earning £2

[1] "Minutes of Evidence," p. 116. [2] "Minutes of Evidence," p. 374.

was engaged by a shopkeeper every morning from 6 to 9, every evening from 4.45 till 8.15, and Sundays from 7 till 11.30. These are by no means isolated instances, but could be multiplied very considerably.

A review of the present state of the law for the protection of children of school age, discloses the fact that the struggle between conflicting ideas in Parliament has often resulted in the compromise of half measures which are more useless than no measures at all. The provisions of the Education Act of 1876, which enacts that no person may take into his employ a child between the ages of five and fourteen years are rendered nugatory by the important exemption which allows employment out of school hours, if it does not interfere with the efficient elementary education of the child. It is believed that until November of last year no action had ever been taken against an employer, because the employment precluded the efficient education of the child. The Act of 1880 prohibits the employment of children betwen ten and thirteen, without a certificate under the bye-laws, but it has never been interpreted as excluding labour out of school hours. Again, great difficulty is found in England in enforcing the provisions of the Protection of Children Act, which proscribes street selling by children under eleven, and by girls under sixteen and boys under fourteen, between nine at night and six in the morning. The law is practically inoperative, because the burden of offence lies with the person who "causes or procures" any child to sell, and power is only given to a constable to take into custody any person who within view of such constable commits an offence under the Act.

The inadequacy of the existing law for dealing with the excessive employment of children was recognised by the Inter-Departmental Committee in their Report,[1] and their recommendations which were in favour of the regulation of children's labour were embodied by the Government in a Bill[2] which was brought forward by Mr. Ritchie, then Home Secretary, in July, 1902, and which has now, unfortunately, been withdrawn. The measure gave to County or County Borough Councils the power to prescribe by bye-laws for all children, or for boys and girls separately, and with respect to all occupations, or to any specified occupation:

A. The age below which employment should be illegal;

B. The hours between which employment should be illegal;

C. The number of daily or weekly hours beyond which employment should be illegal;

[1] "Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee on the Employment of School Children" (cd. 849, 1901), p. 21.

[2] "Employment of Children Bill." Bill 270, 1902.

prohibiting absolutely, or permitting under conditions, the employment of children in any specified occupation which might be shown to be dangerous to health or morals. Special powers based on the Liverpool and Manchester Corporation Acts were to be granted to County and County Borough Councils to regulate by license all street trading by persons under sixteen, prohibiting or permitting such street trading subject to conditions of age, sex, or otherwise. The employment of any child between nine in the evening and six in the morning was to have been prohibited, and likewise such work as was likely to cause injury to the life, limb, or health of a child, such as the carrying or lifting of heavy weights.

Certain points call for especial criticism, particularly the purely permissive character of the Bill. In the absence of any statutory limitation as to the minimum age and maximum hours beyond which no child may be employed, many councils may probably take no action whatever; and it is therefore desirable that amendments be added fixing a minimum limit of age under which no child may be employed, and the maximum number of hours daily and weekly, during which such occupations may be carried on. A portion of the difficulty of dealing with children employed in home industries could be met by the repeal of Section 114 of the Factories and Workshops Act, 1901, which expressly exempts from inspection those places where the work is only pursued intermittently, and does not form the staple means of support of the family. The framing of bye-laws alone would probably not meet the case of children who work for long hours in their own homes. The re-introduction and the passing of the Bill in its present form, and its adoption by a large number of local authorities would certainly effect a considerable improvement in the condition of juvenile wage earners. It is to be feared, however, that unless vigorous efforts are made to arouse public interest in the measure, a settlement of the question may be postponed indefinitely, and it is therefore imperative that all who care for the moral, physical, and educational welfare of children shall not relax their efforts until the regulation and control of children's labour throughout the United Kingdom has been secured. But although legislation can do much, public opinion can achieve more. Let us, therefore, hope that men and women may realise more thoroughly from day to day that the true strength of a nation lies in securing happy and healthy lives for the young children of the State, in giving them that which is their rightful possession—their childhood.

APPENDIX.

THE following publications will be found useful in studying the question of children's employment:

1. "Minutes of Evidence taken before the Inter-Departmental Committee on the Employment of School Children" (cd. 895, 1902), 4*s.* 2*d.*
2. "Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee on the Employment of School Children" (cd. 849, 1901), 3*d.*
3. "Employment of Children Bill." Bill 270, 1902, 1*d.*
4. "Elementary Schools: Parliamentary Return of Children Working for Wages." Part I. (numbers, ages, standards, occupations), 1899, 3*d.*
5. Part II., Particulars of Children leaving School to follow specified Occupations, 1899, 6*d.*
6. "Report of the Public Control Officer of the London County Council, Employment of Children out of School Hours," 1900, 4*d.*
7. "Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee on the Employment of Children of school age, especially in Street Trading in the large centres of population in *Ireland*" (cd. 1144, 1902), 1*s.* 8*d.*

The above can be had of Messrs. Eyre and Spottiswoode, East Harding St., E.C.; and Messrs. P. S. King and Son, 2, Gt. Smith St., S.W.

8. "The Employment of Children. Scottish Council for Women's Trades, 58, Renfield Street, Glasgow," 6*d.*, by post 7½*d.*
9. "Wage Earning Children," by the Rev. J. Bell Cox. Tinling and Co., 53, Victoria Street, Liverpool. Can be had on application.
10. "Kinderarbeit und Gesetz gegen die Ausnutzung kindlicher Arbeitskraft in Deutschland," von Konrad Agahd. David Nutt, 57, Long Acre, W.C., 2*s.* 6*d.*
11. "Report of Committee on Wage Earning Children," 1900, 1*d.* (Miss N. Adler, 6, Craven Hill, W.)

Published by the Committee on Wage Earning Children, November, 1902. *Chairman*: Sir Charles Elliott, K.C.S.I. *Chairman of Executive*: Stephen N. Fox, Esq. *Hon. Treasurer*: F. W. Buxton, Esq. *Hon. Secretary*: Miss N. Adler, 6, Craven Hill, London, W.

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